The Sun.
BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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THE GRAY PROPHET HONORED.

THE Whitman centenary does not pass unnoticed in These States. Every one heard from on such occasions is forward with a tribute. The Institutions of the Higher Learning, whose benefits WALT WHITMAN did without (this accounting for the untrammelled expression of his individuality, or else making him doubly wonderful; take your choice), hold centenary celebrations. The poets sing WALT in his own way. At least they try, and it does them credit, and some of the singing is good. Doubtless a few odd thousand eighth grade youngsters said *Captain, My Captain* in a few odd thousand school rooms Friday afternoon, and the youngish teachers with tired faces bravely held up to the sun of Literature wrote WALT'S dates on the blackboards, and the classes learned that he was a Great Man for his countrymen to be proud of, and started in life the right way, as a poor boy.

There was something of a notable observance in Brooklyn last month under Institute of Arts and Sciences auspices. The best Whitmanian living, old JOHN BURROUGHS, who knew his idol fifty years ago and appreciated him even earlier, and stoutly proclaimed him in a day when to do it invited "Who's this WHITMAN?" or a shudder or a sneer, was there to say, "I told you so" without malice. Dr. SAMUEL MCCHORD CROTHERS spoke of the deeply religious character of much of WHITMAN'S work, in which "the best spirit of the old Hebrew prophets is revived"; what would Whilomville church and literary circles have said to that forty years or less ago, when if you owned a copy of *Leaves of Grass* you didn't keep it on the parlor table, especially not if the minister was making his pastoral calls? EDWIN MARKHAM and LOUIS UNTERMEYER represented the poets. One of the literary executors, Mr. HARNED, told the rights of the story of WALT'S tomb. The editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* spoke of his predecessor; and the genial Prof. WILLIAM LYON PHELPS essayed to explain why it had taken WHITMAN so long to come into his own. A true pioneer, an original as opposed to an adaptive genius, must overcome the early impression of the strangeness of his work and create the demand which adaptive geniuses have only to supply. That was the idea.

Is His Public "His Own"?

We agree that the "strangeness"—more than any obscurity, for WHITMAN is not obscure; and more than the once much pothered-about "indecency"—retarded the appreciation of the public. But as to his coming into his own we wonder. Has he come into it? What is his own? The heart of the common man he claimed? The genuine esteem of the democratic multitude he loved? More Americans probably read him now than did ten years ago. Among them the proportion may be larger of those who truly are his; not born discoverers with a special spark or conscientious, culturated seekers of The Best, who have learned that to go in for WHITMAN is the thing.

Still the anomaly of his place in his country seems to us to remain, though thousands of common men, of and for whom he wrote, have come to know his name, and that judges of authors set store by him, and though hundreds of big-S and tens of little-S superior persons are his readers, and some of them are unqualified Whitmanians. In fact, we are not sure that WHITMAN'S own were not reading him more when his fame was chiefly for "indecency"! But we are not sure of any of this; we discuss it with an open, not to say a draughty, mind.

Certainly there are changes. One of them touches the standing reproach to Americans that they need the Old World to point out their great men of letters, a reproach which when heard from Americans is part and parcel of the obsession, troubling a numerous academic class among us, that everything new signed by an Englishman whose name has become known here must be better than anything new signed by any American.

In WHITMAN'S case the reproach never did have good, strong legs to stand on. Who abroad was much ahead of EMERSON with recognition of him, and who abroad could have been more valuable to him as a champion? What imported opinions could have weighed more with thoughtful Americans than those of EMERSON, EDWARD EVERETT HALE and Mr. BURROUGHS? No; in heralds among his countrymen WALT WHITMAN was well off, remarkably well off when you think of the "strangeness" Prof. PHELPS alludes to. Fully as well off as he would have been if his country had been England, and possibly as well as if it had been France. And if we had time and patience to chase that reproach further and use a club on it we might enumerate the Old World authors who had to come into their owns by way of These States.

But we are digressing. We were speaking of a change. Whoever pointed out WHITMAN to Americans during his prime failed to make them see him. Nowadays we do see him, whether or not a large percentage of us understand what we see. None of us with a reputation to risk cares to risk it in crying him down, nor does anybody with temerity and a turn for sensational advertising pick him out to try live jackal tricks upon. You can still hear it earnestly debated whether he is a poet or not, and the negative debaters are not confined to the class who think poets write rhymes, five-foot blank verse, or "This is the forest primeval" and tinkle-tinkle Hiawatha, and nothing else. But even if he was not a poet, the negative side respectfully allows that he was WALT WHITMAN, and the topsy-turvy question a bold Whitmanian might retort with, "Are most poets WALT WHITMAN or not?" would not be found wildly preposterous to-day.

Centenary apart, the case of WALT'S fame in America just now seems peculiarly good; he is still "advanced," but the vanguard in force is up with him. To that extent he has indeed come into his own, and richly. (Would he call it his own?)

"Unclean" No More.

Then another change touches another standing reproach, namely, that Columbia beside her reading lamp is a prude, that a jaundiced descendant of the Covenanter's ethics sits cross-legged over the destinies of our artistic offspring—as Milton did *not* say. We have got to the point, at least the big-and-little S superior persons among us jointly have, of agreeing with the Old World that our two first poets are WHITMAN and POE; and an impression is current that the reason why it took us so long to place them, aside from the saw about the prophet in his own country, is that POE was a Bad Man, who Drank; whereas WHITMAN, although a Good Man (there are those who strive grotesquely to make him out Bad, but they have to go wide around the barn and over the muckheap and through the burdocks), had an Indelicate Mind. With regard to POE the reasoning seems sound. With regard to WHITMAN, we like Prof. PHELPS'S hypothesis better. It sounds more plausible, though the scandalous reputation of *Leaves of Grass* probably challenged the notice of some of the men who became WHITMAN'S champions. Anyway, however that may be and whatever may be the present influence of prudery upon American appreciation, the scandal is now stale and blown away. *Leaves of Grass* is in good odor.

No longer does even Whilomville scurry to hide WALT WHITMAN when the pastor turns in at the gate. Instead you would find that Whilomville makes a point of owning a gilt-topped, deckle-edged edition of his book—although, we fear, it shelves him behind glass, along with BURNS and BYRON and SHELLEY and SWINBURNE, other bugaboos of yesterday who are innocuous classics to-day, and whom no family that means to do well by the children should be without. Meanwhile, incidentally, plenty of our respectable publishers and editors are putting forth, quite as a matter of course, plenty of verse and prose that is as "frank" as frank can be; and only Mr. SUMNER and his school do so much as think about the pillory.

Columbia a prude about WALT nowadays? Of course not. That particular dragon which helped bar his way to his own has lost its fangs and its brimstone breath and stretched its senile, feeble length to snooze in the clear light of day.

Still—has he come into his own?

A CARD OF THANKS.

COLLECTIONS of short stories being notoriously hard to sell, except when the writer's mere name will sell out the first edition of any book of his in advance, many a capital tale dies young, with perfunctory flowers from the reviewers of current magazines, and interment in the bound files.

Not all that die are by one-story writers either, or by leisurely, unconstrained producers of one or two a year. It occasionally happens that a writer finds a market, finds a public and turns out his honorable quota every month, keeping it up to an enviable standard, and presumably enjoying a modest material reward—yet failing of a different reward which he deserves and which would mean more to him. He comes to be taken for granted, read but not wreathed, neither ignored nor acclaimed. Because the merits of his work were sound and quiet instead of spectacular he was not "discovered" when he began, and now critics can't discover him. It would look foolish. Besides, enthusiastic discoverings are oftener done among books.

All of which is prefatory to the simple observation that in our opinion they don't write Mr. WILL PAYNE'S kind of short story much if any better than he is writing it. How far the foregoing paragraphs apply to Mr. PAYNE we do not know. We like his stories and watch for them, and so have jimmied an opening to put the fact in print.

The Librarian's Corner

CONDUCTED BY

FRANK PARKER STOCKBRIDGE.

A LIBRARIAN'S REJOINDER.

SAID Frank L. Dowling, President of the Borough of Manhattan, at a recent meeting of the New York City Board of Estimate:

"Take the Carnegie Libraries. I believe the city put up the land and Carnegie the buildings. We spent hundreds of thousands and millions for that work, and what does the work do in the long run? Men go into the libraries, read themselves to death, and then they come out and try to upset the Government."

Other men in office have said similar things in other cities. Librarians everywhere confront the opposition of politicians and public officials (who conceive it their duty to keep everything exactly as it is) to any illumination of the public mind that might enable people to see that some things could be changed without damaging anybody—except, possibly, some men in office. Not all are frank about it, but wherever there has been set up a bureaucratic system of administration of public affairs, wherever a political autocracy has intrenched itself, the more intelligent of its supporters realize that they must keep the people from reading—which implies thinking—if they do not want their carefully erected organization scrapped. So they call their own particular pet system "government," and denounce as "enemies of the Government" every one who would change it; they are perfectly honest, too, most of them, in their belief that their system is the best system possible and that there is something treasonable in any attempt to change it. And they are right, holding that belief, in wanting to keep people out of the Public Library; for the library, every library, is full of books that teach precisely the opposite doctrine!

Bound Explosives.

It makes no difference by what party label any particular system of government is identified; it is immaterial whether it be called an autocracy, a limited monarchy, a republic or an empire; every public—and private—library is a veritable munitions dump of high-explosive shells with which the whole system may be blown up whenever enough people are interested in doing so to make their desire effective. There is more dynamite in books than du Pont ever made; all literature is filled with the stuff that overthrows empires. The Caliph Omar knew what he was about when he ordered the library at Alexandria burned; he was laying the foundations of Mohammedan rule and it would have interfered with his plans if any one had been able to quote the chapter and verse that sanctioned revolt against what he doubtless would have termed "constituted authority."

There were plenty of books of that sort in the Alexandria library, just as there are lots of them in the libraries to-day. Every part of the United States has recently reported an active circulation of Woodrow Wilson's *New Freedom*—but, of course, Mr. Dowling was not referring to the writings of the leader of the political party to which he himself belongs. Nor did he have in mind, presumably, the masterpiece of the founder of that party, to be found in every library and known as the *Declaration of Independence*.

Mark Twain's Opinion.

What public men of one school are afraid of is not such ancient statements of fundamental truths, but books that delude readers into the belief that these truths still hold good and these ancient principles are susceptible of present-day application. Imagine the havoc that might follow the general circulation of Mark Twain's works, for example, which contain such treasonable dicta as his indorsement of the Connecticut Constitution. Why, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* the author declares that "the citizen who thinks that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit is disloyal; he is a traitor. That he may be the only one who thinks he sees this decay does not excuse him; it is his duty to agitate anyway, and it is the duty of the others to vote him down if they do not see the matter as he does."

And yet such books are permitted to circulate in our public libraries!

What the librarians know, and the politicians don't, is that dynamite is dangerous only when confined. Try to suppress it or knock it in the head and it will blow up with a loud report and damage the hand that hit it; set it off in the open field and it may scare the bystanders, but it won't hurt anybody.